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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Flight From Grim Reality

Since the start of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks in the first year of the Nixon administration, never has the air been as full of talk of disarmament as it has this spring. Suddenly we have a whole cottage industry producing books celebrating the horrors of nuclear war. We have demonstrators and Senators advocating a nuclear "freeze," which presumably would somehow stop the two-decade-long Soviet arms buildup. We have four establishment figures calling for a pledge not to use nuclear weapons if the Soviets invaded Europe with their massive conventional armies. We have an impending disarmament circus at the United Nations. And we have the President of the United States going on television proposing to negotiate not a freeze but actual reductions in nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, Soviet forces are using poison gas against the local resistance, shattering the granddaddy of all arms control treaties. The Geneva protocol banning use of chemical weapons was negotiated in 1925, and has been the most widely observed of all disarmament measures. Hitler went to his pyre without violating it.

In Laos and Cambodia, Soviet-supplied forces have been using what

Whither Arms Control?—I

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primitive tribesmen have christened "yellow rain," and testimony exists that Soviet officers have participated in these attacks. We now know that "yellow rain" contains biological toxins derived from molds. The production, possession or transfer of such toxins was explicitly outlawed by the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972. This means the Soviets signed the convention in a spirit of utter duplicity, all the while laying their plans to violate it massively. This was done through the full flower of detente; 1972 was the same year that President Nixon and Chairman Brezhnev signed SALT-I.

Never has arms control been such a patent failure, and never has enthusiasm for disarmament been more widely broadcast. How to explain this paradox? Is it a paradox? Or is it perhaps an expectable conjuncture, a natural psychological syndrome?

tion of MAD by former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, U.S. doctrine has never included deliberate targeting of the Soviet population. In U.S. plans for a retaliatory strike, the three highest priorities go to targets of immediate military relevance, from Soviet strategic forces to leadership and control. The fourth and final priority is the Soviet industrial base. An exchange would involve heavy civilian casualties, particularly if enough weapons survived to attack industrial targets. Yet American military planners have an instinctive revulsion to targeting civilians.

Surely this instinct is to be encouraged rather than discouraged. A policy of no first use may eventually become feasible thanks to cruise missile accuracies. But this is quite a different position from that of Mr. McNamara and his three compatriots, who urge both no first use and increased reliance on the Strangelovian logic of MAD. A better policy to declare, we should think, would be no use against civilians.

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The realities of U.S. megatonnage and targeting doctrine, of course, seem oddly irrelevant to this spring's commotion over disarmament. This has been anything but a grass-roots movement; the small type in one Newsweek poll read, "Based on the 43% who had heard of the nuclear-freeze movement." But it has been important in the media, in the politicized parts of the scientific community and in the establishment churches. Throughout, the impressive thing has been an otherworldly quality, as if the sin of nuclear war can be averted by contemplating the horror of Hell.

This is a historically familiar reaction—to flee from the grim realities of this world by seeking salvation in the next. Sufficient moral revulsion against the horror of nuclear war will cleanse your conscience, relieving you of the necessity to deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of deterring such a war. In its wish for a simpler and more moral world, the nuclear freeze movement is the upper-middle-class equivalent of the Moral Majority.

The moving force is fear, and let us be clear, there is much to fear. But it has little to do with inanimate objects of steel and plutonium. What we have to fear is the Soviet leadership, which

Those most actively promoting nuclear disarmament repeatedly tell us that the roots of their anxiety lie in a nuclear "arms race," with both the U.S. and the Soviet Union piling up more and more indiscriminate destructive power—enough to blow up the world or at least insure the extinction of the human race. No one for a moment doubts that nuclear war is a horror to be avoided, but at least on the U.S. side the "arms race" metaphor has little relation to reality. In fact, the sheer explosive power of the U.S. nuclear arsenal today is less than half of what it was in 1960.

Many will no doubt be startled to learn that the megatonnage of the American force has generally been not increasing but declining. The reason is simple: Better weapons are not necessarily more destructive weapons; more usually the opposite is the case. A Minuteman missile sure to penetrate Soviet air defenses carries a smaller warhead than a B-52 bomber. A Polaris submarine missile carries a smaller warhead yet. With these improvements, indiscriminate destruction declines.

This is particularly true in the current era of rapidly increasing missile accuracies. If you can actually hit targets, you need far smaller warheads. Indeed, cruise missiles with conventional warheads will be able to take over many military missions now assigned to tactical nuclear weapons. In the event of a European war, for example, Eastern bloc airfields could be attacked by cruise missiles carrying the British warhead that took out the airstrip on the Falklands. Unless, that is, cruise missile development is choked off by some arms agreement.

The notion of an American-led race for indiscriminate destruction arises in no small part from the curious doctrine of "mutual assured destruction," which holds that it is desirable that each side be able to destroy the other's society. Despite the popularization

has conducted an arms drive far beyond any conceivable defense need, built huge numbers of nuclear weapons, which probably have added to the world's megatonnage, has developed outlawed weapons like "yellow rain" and holds an expanding list of "clients" in military subjugation. Not surprising that the era of arms control opened shortly after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the current furor erupts with martial law in Poland.

What we need is not moral revulsion, but options for changing Soviet behavior. This spring we have seen only one that strikes us as groundbreaking. Jerome Wiesner, former science adviser to President Kennedy, suggests a "unilaterally declared moratorium." We are glad to see this out of the closet, since unilateral disarmament is at least an option about which we can debate and vote. And Mr. Wiesner's option is an honest expression of his frustration at trying to reach arms control by negotiating treaties with the Soviets.

Here, we think, is the real meaning of this spring's commotion over disarmament. We have ferment because we are at a turning point in the history of arms negotiations. The comforting illusion that we could avoid nuclear war by negotiating treaties with the current Soviet leadership has slipped away—with the inability of negotiators to reach a SALT-II agreement sound enough for a Democratic Senate to ratify, and now with the blatant Soviet arms-control violations in Southeast Asia. While we probably do not want to abandon arms talks outright, we certainly do need to rethink the central role we have assigned them in our national security policy.

The current ferment is one expression of this need. The nuclear freeze movement represents an inchoate recognition that the road Mr. Nixon started to walk in 1969 has reached a dead end.